Research Article

REFUTING THE NEST FALLACY THROUGH EQUALITY IN ELT

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The dichotomous fallacy of Native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and Non-native English- speaking teachers (NNESTs) has often mislead the English teaching community on grounds of right credentials and language teaching proficiencies. Natives are usually considered as the rightful speakers of a language, which may not be true. Various studies point out that there are certain special teaching qualities and characteristic features that make both NESTs and NNESTs unique and important. The aim of this pilot project is to refute this myth of superiority of NESTs through promoting equality and fairness in hiring practices and acknowledging the worth of both while establishing English as a global language. Two questionnaires (one for English teachers and the other one was for students) were administered to gather data and analyze them to further this research. Roughly 75 teachers both NNESTs and NESTs were involved. Both native and non-native teachers agreed that being a native is neither a necessary criteria for the teachers of English nor an indication of better teaching. The study also concluded that collaboration is essential to build a stronger foundation of mutual respect, effective communication and interaction in TESOL classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

There is a common perception that English language teaching is plagued globally by discriminatory practices and bias against NNESTs. There is a clear case of prejudice and injustice when considering the abilities of NNESTs as compared to their native counterparts. Our aim should be to remove these boundaries and align ourselves for better development of ELT in global perspective. TESOL Kuwait is an example of fostering the spirit of non-discriminatory professional environment across Kuwait. Through one of its newly established SIG NNEST, project leader intended to collaborate and lead the NNEST movement for the mutual benefit of NESTs and NNESTs in Kuwait.The project aimed at promoting equity and collaboration amongst Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) and refute the NEST fallacy. Through this pilot project, two questionnaires were administered to teachers (NNESTs & NEST) and students alike with an objective to reveal their perception about the native/non-native teacher dichotomy, disprove the NEST fallacy and promote equality in ELT community.

Background: NESTs and NNESTs Defined

Native speakers of any language essentially mean a person born in a culture and the first language he or she acquires in that culture.

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It could also mean the first language learnt from childhood. Native speakerism also represents having correct knowledge of a language and owing allegiance to the community that speaks that language. Kachru defines 'native speakers' as the primary standard-providing users of the language or the English speakers from the so called 'inner circle countries.'

However, looking at the statistics globally, it is found that the number of English speakers in countries like India, Philippines and Jamaica account for approximately the total number of English speakers from UK, US and Canada combined together (Kachru, 2005). Not only this, the number of non-native speakers of English in the US itself has been increasing at a dramatic rate during the last two to three decades. In this light it becomes essential to consider the manner in which English is used by these non-native speakers of English. It is here the concept of World Englishes comes in.

Thus, according to Kachru's (1992) model the world of English speakers can be divided into three circles primarily. The 'Inner Circle' comprises of the native speakers from countries such as US, UK and Australia; The other two groups coming from the rest of the world and can be categorized as non-native speakers of English. Among these two groups, the 'Outer Circle' comprises users of English as a second language from countries such as India, Jamaica and the Philippines, where speakers from these countries use English for institutional purposes or officially in government offices as the first language (Kachru, 1982). The final group is the "Expanding Circle" which comprises the speakers from countries such as Russia, China and Japan. These countries

depend on the native speakers for teaching the basic norms for learning English. The speakers from these countries learn English as a foreign language (Kachru, 1992) (See Figure 1).

It is with the speakers from these three Kachruvian Concentric Circles in mind that one can say there are variety of Englishes that these speakers use and need to interact with each other in the globalization era. This has given rise to the concept of "World Englishes" or the concept of English as an "International Language" having different and varied linguistic norms.
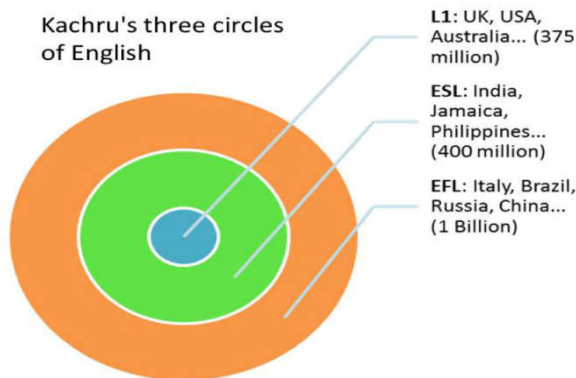
Figure 1 Kachru's three circles of English (from Kachru, 1992, p. 2)

There are more Non-native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) today as against Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) in the world today. The dichotomy of NEST and NNEST is based on the looks and the accent of the English speaking teachers. Certain writers, such as Peter Medgyes, believe that differences between these two categories exist. He thinks that the two are very different from each other on the basis of their competence of the language (Medgyes, 1992). He has based his discussion on the following principles:

a. NNESTs and NESTs are different in terms of language proficiency,
b. they are different in terms of teaching behaviour,
c. most of the differences in teaching behaviour are attributed to the differences in language proficiency, and
d. both categories of teachers can be equally good teachers on their own terms (Medgyes, 1992).

However, it would not be fair to categorise people into natives or non-native English Teachers based on their first language, as teachers from India, Hong Kong and Singapore learn English as their first language along with other languages. It could be misleading if we regard them as non-natives because they consider themselves as native speakers of certain kind of English which is very original to them (Mufwane, 1998). Also, there are bilingual teachers who can speak more than one language and can be considered both natives and non-natives.

As mentioned above, the majority of English teaching force today comprises of NNESTs today, but the discrimination or the bias against them continues. At times, non-native English teachers with high credentials are forced to accept inferior jobs because the recruiters wish to pursue the market demand rather than give credit to a person's pedagogical skills and language proficiency. It is portrayed as if the native speakers are genetically superior to their non-native counterparts who miserably try to imitate the language they are learning (Selvi, 2010).

It has also been revealed in the literature that students generally perceive their non-native teachers to be inefficient in comparison to their native counterparts unless they prove otherwise by their language proficiency or teaching skills (Maum, 2002). The tide is, however, turning now, as many organizations like TESOL international and IATEFL devoted to the development of TEFL and TESOL are promoting cross-cultural talent and communication in English language teaching. The dichotomous fallacy of NESTs and NNESTs though still exists despite the discarding of the notion long ago by many eminent scholars in the late 20th century.

It is also believed that NNSs are so abundant, and because they must so frequently interact, native standards are no longer a realistic, pertinent, practical target for this group of speakers. Having English as one's mother tongue does not automatically qualify anyone to teach the language. NNESTs can be trained to obtain the necessary knowledge, native speakers possess. NESTs and NNESTs both possess certain attributes that could facilitate the teaching process.

Mehboob (2004) found that students perceived NESTs to be best at teaching oral skills and vocabulary, while NNESTs to be more effective in teaching literacy skills and grammar (Mehboob, 2004). Research shows NNS teachers are better role models for learners in presenting a metacognitive view of English learning from the non-native perspective. NNSs can be better teachers in ESL contexts, because of their multicultural experience.

Many studies show students' resentment at being taught by a nonnative speaker until they were able to prove that they could be as effective as a native-English-speaking teacher. The issue of accent has often been sometimes the cause of employment discrimination practices in ESL programs which is an unfair practice. Non-native teachers are not necessarily better educators as native accent is not the criteria of successful teachers. Even native speakers have varied accents across what is referred to as native speaker countries; e.g. the U.S, UK and Canada. Intelligibility and the ability to communicate successfully, rather than accent, is the important target for language learners and speakers.

The Study

Two online questionnaires were administered. The first was developed for English teachers to obtain responses from the concerned subjects. Since the subject relates to NESTs and NNESTs a sizable number of NES and NNES teachers from both ESL and EFL background were targeted and contacted during the research project. The Questionnaires employed closed questions of 5-point Likert rating scale and open-ended questions. The questionnaire sent to NESTs consisted of roughly 17 questions (Appendix A) whereas questionnaire sent to NNESTs consisted of 25 questions as it had some extra questions related to language teaching settings (EFL and ESL) and environment (Appendix B) 75 teachers; 37 NESTs and 38 NNESTs responded to the questionnaire, and they come from various universities and colleges, both private and public. Questionnaires had open ended questions. The demographic background was also collected along with general questions pertaining to language teaching. Most of the teachers spoke at least two languages and thought it helped them understand their student's problems better.

The second questionnaire was developed for the student community through online tools using a digital classroom tool which is Edmodo (Appendix C). 106 students filled in the online questionnaire over a period of two months. 74 students were females and 32 students were males. The majority of the students were Kuwaitis, as the researcher taught at Kuwait University and most of my data came from there. However, the researcher also conducted this study at Arab Open University where the demographic was quite diverse with students from different Arab countries come to study notably Syrians, Jordanians and Iranians.

It is important to collect demographic and educational information of the subjects as it is vital to the study too. Hence the subjects were asked to provide information on their gender, age, first language, and years of teaching experience, second language skills, their academic qualifications and the teaching medium of instruction in the schools or colleges they teach.

Findings

The study revealed startling facts. 52% NESTs and 48% NNESTs on being asked which skills they preferred to teach, showed preference to teaching language skills along with teaching grammar. This was against the belief that NNESTs prefer teaching grammar and writing only. Both groups of teachers; NESTs and NNESTs, agreed that being a Native or a Non-native speaker did not make any difference in their teaching. They also believed that this did not affect language teaching in general, and being a native speaker is not necessarily equivalent to quality teaching standards.

Preference of NESTs and NNESTs to Teaching Language Skills and Grammar

As shown in Figure 2, 42 NESTs and 39 NNESTs believed that teaching language skills – Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking were important along with teaching grammar. 10 NESTs and 16 NNESTs thought it wasn't important. Surprisingly, 18 NNESTs thought it was somewhat important as against 17 NESTs. Also, 6 NESTs weren't sure if it was important against a 2 NNESTs.

Table 1 Preference to Teaching Language Skills and Grammar

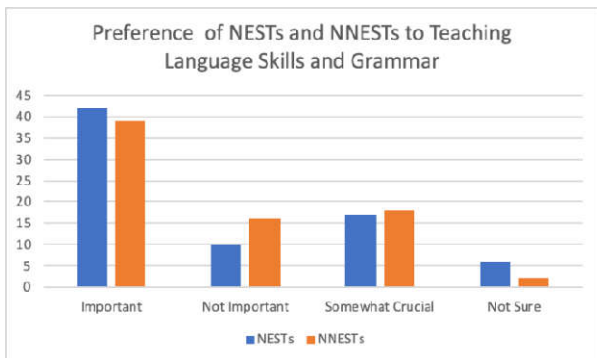|	Yes	No	Somewhat crucial	Not Sure
NESTs	42	10	17	6
NNESTs	39	16	18	2

Figure 2 NESTs and NNESTs preference to Teaching Language Skills and Grammar

NESTs on NNESTs as Better Teachers

On being asked, whether NNESTs are better English teachers, 39 NESTS replied in the negative while 4 accepted they could

be better teachers. Surprisingly, 22 teachers accepted that they were not sure if NNESTs are better teachers. 10 NESTs somewhat believed that NNESTs are better teachers.

Table 2 NESTs on NNESTs being Better English Teachers

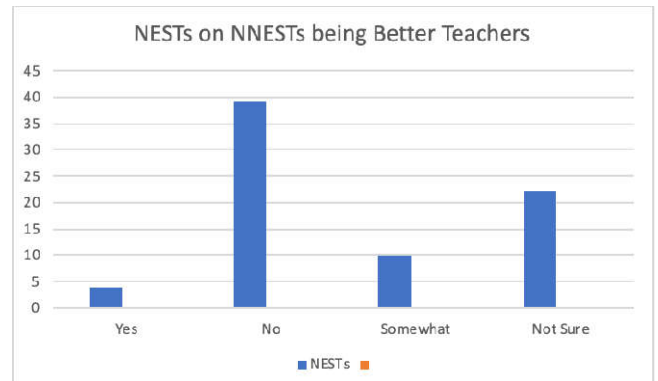|	Affirmative (Yes)	Negative (No)	Somewhat	Not Sure
NESTs	4	39	10	22

Figure 3 NESTs on NNESTs being Better English Teachers

NNESTs on NESTs as Better Teachers

45 NNESTs believed that NESTs aren't better teachers just because they are natives while 5 NNESTs accepted that NESTs are better language teachers. Also,15 NNESTs believed that NESTs are somewhat better, as against 10 NESTs accepting NNESTs are better teachers. Also 8 NNESTs weren't sure about NESTs being better teachers. However against this, 22 NESTs weren't sure about NNESTs being better teachers.

Table 3 NNESTs on NESTs being Better English Teachers

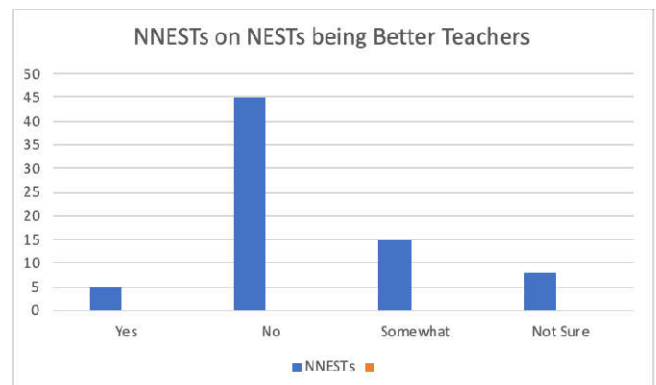|	Affirmative (Yes)	Negative (No)	Somewhat	Not Sure
NNESTs	5	45	15	8

Figure 4 NNESTs on NESTs being Better Teachers

Students' Preferences for a Native English Teacher

Most of the students preferred a native speaker (61 NESTs and 50 NNESTs) 16 had no preference for NESTs as against 23 having no preference for NNESTs. However, they all agreed that their preference depended on skills taught in the class (28 preferred NESTs and 33 preferred NNESTs) This again was a startling result.

Table 4 Student's Preference for a Native/ Non-native English Teacher

	Preference	No Preference	Preference based on skills taught
NNESTs	50	23	33
NESTs	61	16	28
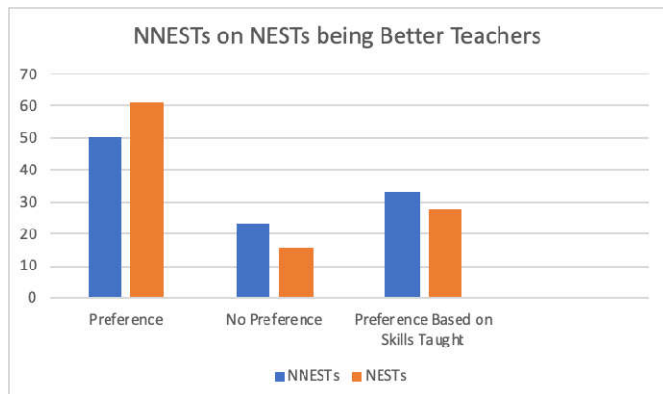
Figure 5 Students' Preference for a Native/Non-native Teacher

DISCUSSION

This project aimed at challenging the established perceptions and fallacies relating to NESTs and NNESTs by contributing to the debate of native and non-native dichotomy. The research outlined arguments for and against this dichotomy, reviewing previous research while investigating the teaching behavior of NNESTs and NESTs, promoting fair practices in judging abilities of both, credibility in the workplace for NNESTs and establish equality in ELT.

The results from the students were startling in that, they showed a marked preference for native speakers but also agreed and pointed to the fact that a lot depended on the skills taught and the efficiency of the teacher. The above findings and the researcher's observations and experiences in this area point to the following discussion.

From the initial review, we could form a few theories for our research. There needs to be an equity attached to NESTs and NNESTs as both have strengths and weaknesses in their pedagogical styles. As against the common belief, NNESTs give sufficient importance to teaching skills in classes. Students do not have any preferences for native teachers or non-native teachers as the employers make it look like. Students actually respect a capable and proficient teacher. We need to collaborate between NESTs and NNESTs to bring the best of both the teaching styles for the benefits of learners.

The main findings of this study will have changes in the pedagogical perception of learners as well as instructors of the English language. It will help the non-native teachers feel more confident in classes and help them regain self-respect and equity in their professional lives. Not only this, it will allow the learners to reflect on their previous experiences, as to how the study can benefit them in this new light.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This pilot study was conducted involving both NNESTs and NESTs as well as English learners. Both native and non-native teachers agree that being a native speakerism is not necessary to be a successful langue teacher. Students responses also revealed mixed results with almost all students showing preference for teachers on the basis of skills being taught in classes. Also, the difference showing a preference for NESTs over NNESTs was marginal. Therefore, these findings point to the necessity of having collaborative approaches to promote a stronger foundation of mutual respect, effective communication and interaction in TESOL classrooms. To improve the linguistic and literary creativity in English classrooms, language teaching needs a new rhetoric approach of respecting diversity in the background and accents of not only its learners but also its teachers. The racist concept of native speakerism needs to be dismantled.

The topic needs further research and, it can be said that the NEST fallacy is an on-going issue and needs to be further explored. On the basis of the discussed project and research, it is concluded that pluralistic view of English needs to be embraced in daily pedagogical practices. There is a growing consensus among scholars that there is no one English language anymore. Students should be made aware of the concept of World English in the classroom and "native-speakerism" needs to be dismantled. We need to unpack the issues and a strong foundation of mutual respect will help. Advocacy and collaboration need to be encouraged amidst the ELT community. Effective communication is essential to effective English language program instruction and management. Further research is needed to ensure effective NNEST/NEST collaborative efforts as mentioned earlier.

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